

Social participation and cultural policy: a position paper

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1. Introduction: challenges to cultural policy

As in other Western countries, the idea of evidence-based policy has also become popular in the Netherlands. Policy-makers ought to restrict themselves to programmes and measures that have proven to be effective, or that are expected to be effective on the basis of empirical evidence. Complying with this idea, the Directorate-General for Culture and Media of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, has started a discussion on a Knowledge Agenda for the coming decade. The first step in this process was a review of available current research (IJdens and Hagenaaars, 2007). This expert meeting is the next step towards the realisation of the Knowledge Agenda.

The topic of the meeting is the connection between three important policy issues: [1] participation in arts and cultural activities, including media use, [2] civic participation and social cohesion (Lisbon strategy) and [3] the social impacts of (cultural) policy. The first issue concerns implications of changing patterns of participation in arts and cultural activities. The validity of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction is at the centre of this debate. The second issue is the implications of the Lisbon goals with regard to social cohesion and inclusion, against a background of immigration, cultural diversity and persisting poverty in European countries. The third issue is the growing importance attached to social benefits of (cultural) policy. *How can cultural policy, especially policy with regard to cultural participation, promote social cohesion and social inclusion?*

Below, we present some preliminary thoughts about theoretical concepts and empirical research on cultural and social participation, and the connection between the two. It goes without saying that we do not pretend to be exhaustive, but simply wish to offer impetus for discussion.

The paper starts with a discussion on emerging challenges to cultural policy. This is followed by a short review of recent literature on the social impact of participation in the arts and other cultural activities. The final issue is the added value of culture: what is the unique contribution of participation in the arts and other cultural activities to social cohesion, compared with other forms of social participation?

2. Social participation and cultural policy: key concepts and approaches

2.1 Social cohesion, social capital and civil society

In Lisbon, in 2000, the European Union adopted a number of strategic goals for economic and social development. One of these is the promotion of social cohesion and inclusion in all member states. According to the Council of Europe document *Achieving social cohesion in a multicultural Europe* (2006), 'the development of social cohesion in a multicultural Europe is a key political objective, both vital and attainable, for our modern societies. It can be achieved by transcending the limits of "integration" policies, particularly when they take the form of unilateral processes in which migrants and their descendants are not acknowledged as partners in decisions concerning them'. The authors stress that integration problems faced by migrants should not be considered to be 'the result of alleged "cultural incompatibility"'. They talk of 'the combined effects of exclusion stemming from social policy and policy on immigration, employment and nationality. And they stress that 'there are other, much more effective strategies for treating differences in a favourable light which make social rights more accessible to all. These alternative approaches can effectively help to foster social cohesion only if migrants themselves are committed to them, in particular as recognised political players in the European public arena.'

These policy issues reflect *and* stimulate scientific debate and research on social cohesion, inclusion, participation and civil society. Without going into detail, we refer to the work of Amitai Etzioni on communitarianism (1997, 2004), Robert Putnam on social capital (2000, 2007) and Helmut Anheier on civil society (2004). The other side of the coin, social exclusion, has also received attention in politics and academia (Sen, 2000; Hills et al., 2002). In the Netherlands, the National Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) started a research programme on social cohesion in 1997 (see Evenblij, 2007, for a discussion of results and consequences for policy).

Etzioni's political ideas have received a favourable reception among politicians, in the Netherlands and abroad. Central to his communitarian political philosophy is the notion that societies cannot survive without moral commitment and consensus about key values and norms. These need to be embedded and reproduced in social communities and relationships. The constitution of continuity of social communities is a core issue of Robert Putnam's work on social capital, defined as 'social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness'. Social capital, as Putnam understands it, has two functions: *bridging* (establishing new social relations that did not exist before) and *bonding* (maintaining and strengthening existing social relations). (Putnam, 2007). Helmut Anheier defines civil society as 'the sphere of institutions, organisations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market, in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests'. This operational definition does 'not attempt to define all aspects of civil society, nor does it necessarily fit different perspectives and approaches equally well. What the definition does do, however, is to list

elements and components that most attempts to define civil society would identify as essential.’ (Anheier, 2004: 22).

According to the Lisbon strategy, social cohesion should be a major consideration in all areas of government policy, including the arts and culture. Until now, hardly any programmes regarding this issue have been developed in this field. This is the first challenge for current cultural policy.

2.2 Participation in arts and cultural activities: beyond Bourdieu?

Changing patterns of participation in the arts and cultural activities represent a second, twofold challenge that concerns the impact of cultural participation policies on the one hand, and the implications of changing patterns of cultural practice on the other.

The *Cultural Policy Bill*, the legal foundation for cultural policy in the Netherlands, requires the Minister of Culture to ‘create conditions for maintaining and developing “expressions of culture” and disseminating them socially and geographically or otherwise’. The first task is, in principle, easier to achieve than the second. The funding of arts, museums, monuments, public broadcasting and other public media is the core business of Dutch cultural policy, as it is in other European countries. There is of course an ongoing debate about the amount of money to be spent on culture. However, the second mission – social dissemination of culture – is much more difficult to achieve, as cultural policy has no direct influence on artistic and cultural practices or the population’s media use. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, the promotion of cultural participation, especially among those who are not used to participating in art and cultural activities, remains an important issue for cultural policy, even though the efficacy of policy measures aiming to stimulate participation in culture is – to put it mildly – open to debate (Huysmans et al, 2005).

Cultural capital and social stratification

The debate on changing patterns of cultural practice focuses on the connection between social class and culture. Bourdieu’s critical theory on cultural capital and social reproduction has become canonical – at least among sociologists. Cultural capital seems to be the pivotal element in the social stratification of contemporary Western European societies. The nature of the cultural capital, however, underwent a change. Bourdieu’s triple distinction between ‘le goût de liberté’ (bourgeoisie), ‘le goût modeste’ (middle class) and ‘le goût de nécessité’ (working class) is no longer sufficient. Published in 1979, *La distinction* is mainly based on research conducted in the 1960s. Since then, cultural practices of individuals in higher social strata became wider than those in lower social strata. ‘It comprises not only more “high-brow” culture, but also more “middle-brow” and more “low-brow” culture, while the consumption of individuals in lower social strata tends to be largely restricted to more popular cultural forms. The crucial distinction, therefore, is not between elite and mass but rather between cultural omnivores and cultural univores’. (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005).

There is, meanwhile, ample empirical evidence for the omnivore/univore hypothesis. Tak Wing Chan and John Goldthorpe, for instance, proved its validity for music consumption and the attendance of theatre, dance and cinema in England (ibid.), although their findings are criticised by Richard Peterson who introduced the 'snob to omnivore' argument (1996, 2007). Using data from the recurrent Amenities and Services Utilisation Survey of the SCP, Koen van Eijck, Jos de Haan and Wim Knulst demonstrated that the cultural practices of more highly educated Dutch people became more omnivore between 1983 and 1999 (Van Eijck, De Haan and Knulst, 2002).

As far as we know, the bulk of research on cultural difference and differentiation focuses on attendance of cultural venues, such as theatres, concert halls and museums. This is remarkable, as such visits are far from being daily, weekly or even monthly routine. In most studies, respondents who visit theatres or museums at least once a year are compared with those who never visit. By contrast, media consumption, which occupies a substantial portion of daily leisure time, is seldom taken into account. A notable exception is the work of Elchardus and his colleagues from the TOR group at the Free University of Brussels. On the basis of media preferences, the researchers of this group distinguished four cultural dimensions in Flanders: an *entertainment* dimension (TV shows, dating and quiz programmes, hit parade music); a dimension of *cultural correctness* (folk music, classical music, French chansons, TV news and debate programmes) ; a *young-and-alternative* dimension (punk, heavy metal, hard rock, funk, techno and rap, etc.) and a *macho or virile* dimension (action, adventure, science fiction, thriller, erotic movies and TV series). Strong correlation was found between the cultural preferences of parents and their children.¹ The media preferences of parents were also found to have a considerable influence on children's progress at school. Educational attainment is clearly linked to *cultural correctness*. Interestingly enough, the impact of this parental preference on the scholastic success of their children is independent of the parents' background characteristics, such as their educational level, occupation or income (Mestdag and Siongers, 2002; Elchardus and Siongers, 2002).

Symbolic society

The omnivore/univore argument is part of a broader debate on changing cultural patterns and the nature of contemporary society. We refer to ideas and concepts like postmodernism, hybridisation and individualisation, etc.

The theory of 'symbolic society', formulated by the Flemish sociologist Mark Elchardus, offers a systematic approach to the social and cultural changes designated by these concepts. 'Together with rationalisation, individualisation is considered to be one of the most important, constitutive and identifying elements of modernisation'. (Elchardus, 2007:1) Now the old bonds of class, religion, or gender have become obsolete, present-day individuals seem to be almost completely

¹ Incidentally, young people who preferred alternative culture usually had parents who were 'culturally correct'.

autonomous and free to choose. This belief is shared not only by opinion-makers but by prominent sociologists as well, such as Anthony Giddens ('post-traditional society'), Zygmunt Bauman ('liquid modernity') and Ulrich Beck ('risk society'). According to Beck, contemporary men and women have become *homo optionis*. As a result, it is almost impossible to predict their preferences, attitudes or behaviour by the means of sociological variables.

However, when put to the test, there is hardly any empirical evidence for 'liquid modernity' (Bauman) in Western European countries. Using standard sociological variables in his analysis of recurrent SCP surveys between 1970 and 2000, Paul de Beer discovered that the attitudes and behavioural patterns of the Dutch have even become *more* predictable during this period. (De Beer, 2004) The situation seems to be something of a paradox. Although external authorities, such as churches or ideological movements in the Netherlands, have lost control over the attitudes and behaviour of individuals, contemporary men and women still choose to join the 'flock' (Duyvendak and Hurenkamp, 2004).

Elchardus' theory of symbolic society offers an explanation for this paradox; an explanation, moreover, that is firmly grounded in empirical research. In his view, the essential difference between traditional and contemporary society is a change in the mode of social control: 'From a mode of social control based on scarcity [...], religious belief and authority, religiously or ideologically inspired ethics, self-evident tradition, traditional role behaviour, and sensitivity to other-directedness, a number of modernised societies have made the transition to a new mode of social control. The new mode of social control revolves around the self. It is, literally, self-control; control of the self through the self. The self is socially constructed as a choosing individual. Social control is exercised by forming, appealing to and activating those factors that influence the choices individuals make, such as knowledge, competence, taste, frames, routines, meaning and other elements of culture. [...] Self-control operates by socialising the individual into meanings and by confronting him with cultural structures that confirm the meanings, and activates their different functions'.

Three institutions, or as Elchardus calls them, institutional and technological conditions, play the key part in the process of socialisation. The first condition 'has been the expansion of education. The prolongation of schooling, as well as the shift to competence or the broadening of the school's role from cognitive tasks to character formation, education in values, the teaching of social skills and the propagation of democratic citizenship values, has profoundly altered the experience of schooling and the role of schooling in society.' The growing importance of the mass media, and especially of television, is the second condition. Watching television is the most popular and also the most time-consuming pastime. A huge increase in advertising, which has become more sophisticated, is the third condition. 'The system of symbols and meanings realised by activities such as marketing, design, mall construction and advertising carried out by magazines, media giants, department stores, chain stores, mail order stores and e-business, etc. is culturally relevant'. Advertised products are nowadays presented 'as lifestyle scripts and as the props for self-construction (in the sense of construction of the self)'. (Elchardus, 2007:11-14)

2.3 Discussion

Whereas sociologists are now surpassing the boundaries of Bourdieu's 'classical' theory of cultural capital and social reproduction (cf. Goldthorpe, 2007)², cultural policy-makers have not even started to come to terms with the challenge of this theory. Will a renewed interest in the significance of arts and culture in civil society provide a meeting ground for social science and cultural policy, overcoming the cul-de-sac of cultural capital and social reproduction?

3. Social impact of participation in arts and cultural activities

There is a growing interest among policy-makers for the economic and social significance of culture. This awareness is not restricted to the Netherlands. An increasing number of EU countries already have policy programmes for promoting 'cultural' or 'creative' industries or are preparing such programmes. In the *European Agenda for Culture*, the European Commission (2007) stresses the role of 'culture and creativity as important drivers for personal development, social cohesion, economic growth, creation on jobs, innovation and competitiveness'. In a policy document *Our Creative Potential* (2005), the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Economic Affairs introduced measures and schemes to help creative industries to achieve their full economic potential.

Programmes on 'social inclusion' are an important part of the policy of the British Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Cultural policy in Flanders also includes socio-cultural activities such as voluntary work, activities for youth, and sport. In the Netherlands, comparable programmes aimed at enhancing social benefits of the arts and culture are still *in statu nascendi*. For instance, following *Give way to cultural diversity* (1999), the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science issued a second policy paper, *Culture and diversity* (2006). Social integration, especially of immigrants, is an important topic in both documents. Thus, Dutch policy-makers feel that participation in cultural activities can contribute to important social issues such as integration of minorities in Dutch society, community development, or social cohesion and inclusion. However, one gets the impression that this more a matter of principle than of evidence-based policy. Anyway, IJdens and Hagenaaers (2007) concluded that practically no empirical research has been conducted on the social effects of the arts, cultural heritage or the media. Whilst the Netherlands has a long-standing tradition in research into participation in culture, media use and leisure pursuits on the one hand, and into civic participation on the other (the periodical surveys of the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) started in the 1970s), a study of the relation between the two is still lacking.

According to an important advisory body of the Dutch government, the Social-Economic Council, the welfare state in the Netherlands should evolve into an 'active participation society' (Van den Broek, De Haan and De Hart, 2007: 189). This notion of participation society includes practically the whole public sphere:

² See Goldthorpe's critique of the concept of cultural capital in reaction to BJS' special issue on Cultural capital and social inequality, edited by Mike Savage and Tony Bennett (2005).

work, education, health care, politics, et cetera. Research on civic participation is, however, often restricted to leisure activities such as work for and membership of voluntary associations, NGOs and pressure groups. Although voluntary work is an important part of civil society, and perhaps even its core, we do not want the debate during the expert meeting to be restricted to that. Other aspects, such as the relationship between cultural participation and participation in other domains of society (labour, education, politics) can also be discussed. Such studies are still scarce, with the exception of research on cultural capital, education and social stratification.

Below, we present the results of four studies on the relationship between cultural and social participation: two research reports and two reviews of available research.

Researchers of Elchardus' TOR group have published an analysis of the relation between cultural participation and social participation (Claes, Elchardus and Vandebroek, 2007). Due to available data, they chose a 'narrow' definition of cultural participation: visits to performing arts and museums at least once a month. As in other countries, only a fraction of the adult Flemish population (3 to 4 %) visits these venues monthly. Conversely, social participation is far more widespread, with 25 to 34 % of the Flemish working for or having membership of voluntary associations³. A substantial correlation was found between social and cultural participation. As the former is more common, it was concluded that social participation has a favourable effect on cultural participation. People who frequently visit cultural venues, moreover, are also less ethnocentric and more tolerant. The beneficial effect of cultural participation on tolerance was also found in other studies, for instance in a recent German survey (Keuchel and Wiesand, 2006:161).

François Matarasso (1997) evaluated the social impact of some 60 participatory arts projects in the UK, Helsinki and New York, based on experiences and opinions of participants and an analysis of available documents. Principal research findings are divided into six themes: personal development; social cohesion; community empowerment and self-determination; local image and identity; imagination and vision; and health and well-being. Within this framework, only findings on social cohesion and community empowerment and self-determination will be summarised here. Firstly, participatory arts project can contribute to social cohesion. 'At a fundamental level, they bring people together, and provide neutral spaces in which friendship can develop. They encourage partnership and co-operation. Some projects [...] promote intercultural understanding and help recognise the contribution of all sections of the community.' Some projects bring young and old together. Other projects 'could even help reduce fear of crime and help promote neighbourhood security'. Most participants made new friends and half of them learnt about other people's cultures. Secondly, 'taking part in local arts projects is a popular way of becoming involved in community activities'. It helps build organisational skills and capacities, which may be applied to other local projects. 'Participatory arts projects can also be empowering and can help people gain control of their lives.' And 'they can also play a vital role in the regeneration

³Excluding sport associations and - typical of Flanders – pub associations.

process, facilitating consultation and partnership between residents and public agencies'. Finally, arts projects 'can nurture local democracy'. Most participants want to be involved in further projects, and one fifth have gained a new sense of their rights. As a final conclusion, Matarasso states that 'participatory arts projects are wholly in accord with [...] new, inclusive approaches to community and social development, and have a great contribution to make. All that matters is to look beyond the surface, to see not only an amateur drama production or a video project, but also the positive social change which is being facilitated'.

McCarthy et al. (2004) made an extensive review of research on the benefits of arts. 'The study entailed reviewing all benefits associated with the arts, analysing how they are created, and examining how they accrue to individuals and the public through different forms of arts participation'. Leaving aside purely private benefits, the literature on community-level social benefits 'focuses on two general categories: those benefits that promote social interaction among community members, create a sense of community identity, and help build social capital; and those that build a community's organisational capacity through both the development of skills, infrastructures, leaders and other assets, and the more general process of people organising and getting involved in civic institutions and volunteer associations'. According to McCarthy et al., 'the body of empirical literature on the benefits of the arts to communities is limited by both data and methodology. [...] Moreover, the task of isolating the impact of the arts from that of all other factors that can generate social benefits is especially difficult'. Often, 'researchers can at best measure intermediate outputs from the activity [...] that may eventually produce social capital'. Literature on community social benefits in general 'lacks a comprehensive theoretical approach. Instead, empirical studies of community level social benefits tend to focus either on how the arts can build a sense of community or on how arts-related activities can help build a capacity for collective action'.

A recent Australian study is also highly critical about research on social effects of participation in the arts and cultural activities. (AEGIS, 2005) Many research projects lack a clear definition of the problem, as well as an explicit description of the (expected) relations between participatory arts and culture projects and their effect in different areas of social life. In want of quantitative data, anecdotal evidence is often used to claim positive effects. The study mentions a number of reasons for such deficiencies: poor methodology; focus on *output* instead of *outcome*, lack of consensus about research concepts and definitions and insufficient expertise of the art world with regard to programme evaluation: 'Evaluation needs good theoretical grounding and evidence of adequate theoretical grounding was not commonly found'.

4. In search of the added value of participation in arts and cultural activities

Matarasso (1997) and McCarthy et al. (2004) raised the question of whether social benefits of participation in arts and cultural activities could not be realised by other means, e.g. sports, charitable work and other voluntary leisure time activities. Indeed, it seems that many of the arts and cultural projects that were evaluated derive any impact they might have on social cohesion from the sheer fact that they bring different people together and facilitate social interaction. It is the 'social' aspect of these activities that produces their social impact. Other social activities (going to a pub, a fitness club or even a dog fight) may have the same effect. What, then, are art's and culture's 'unique' social benefits, i.e. social impacts that can only be realised (or can be realised most optimally or cost-effectively) through participation in arts and cultural activities?

This is not only the final issue discussed in this paper, but it is also a *terra incognita* because hardly any empirical research has been done to compare the social impact of arts and cultural participation to that of other voluntary social activities. Van der Meulen's recent PhD thesis on the social capital impact of membership in sports clubs may be the sole example. Comparing the social capital impact of sports to cultural participation, he found a significant difference. To his own surprise, 'the findings support the culture-connects-more-than-sports hypothesis' more than the opposite hypothesis. 'Perhaps sport is too easily perceived as a democratic leveller'. (Van der Meulen, 2007: 123)

Two other cases, which are of key concern to the present Dutch government, may offer interesting opportunities for further research into the social impact of arts and cultural participation: the regeneration of deprived urban neighbourhoods with a high concentration of social problems (cf. Kleinhans, Priemus and Engbersen, 2007), and the development of social capital in new towns and suburbs (cf. Deben and Schuyt, 2001). The impact of participation in the arts and cultural activities on social cohesion in these neighbourhoods and towns has not been studied nearly as much as the impact of ICTs (cf. Dries, Hoving, Frissen et al., 2004). According to Frissen (2004), ICTs are assumed, on the one hand, to *empower* civil society, 'by giving new impetus to communication between people and leading to new ways of building a community', and to shape civic engagement. 'On the other hand, ICTs are assumed to cause an impoverishment of social relationships and a decline of what used to be the community and civil society.' Referring to Putnam's thesis that in modern society citizens are increasingly 'bowling alone', Frissen points out that this may bring about a '*balkanisation*' of the public interest. Although ICTs may lead to a blossoming of all sorts of fragmented single-issue and single-interest groups, the more general public interest and social cohesion in society as a whole may be affected negatively. Participation in arts and cultural activities should also be viewed from both sides, seeing its potential for bridging and bonding, as well as any exclusionary impacts (cf. Trienekens, 2004).

Research on the added value of arts and cultural participation for social capital and social cohesion can include different topics, such as the evaluation of concrete

projects that aim to stimulate social integration through arts and culture, including arts education projects, longitudinal studies on the development of social capital and social cohesion through different forms of social participation in local communities, and the impact of parents' cultural participation – compared to their other activities – on their children's educational and social careers.

5. Final remark

The question '*what's special about art and culture*' should be a key issue in research on the social impact of participation in the arts and cultural activities. The debate should not be about the intrinsic *versus* the extrinsic value of art, as is often the case, but about the social impact of the unique qualities of art and culture. Recently, the British writer Jeanette Winterson argued for the unique value and the social necessity of serious art as opposed to the idea that the distinction between art and popular culture is only a matter of arbitrary (or socially determined) taste. (Winterson, 2007). If we agree with Winterson, albeit for the sake of argument, we may say that it is not art itself that exerts symbolic power and enforces social exclusion, but rather the social context in which art is produced, presented and promoted. So, instead of blaming art and culture for being 'elitist' or socially exclusive, one should criticise a 'cultural apparatus' (C. Wright Mills) that reproduces art's exclusion from society. Policy-makers should, therefore, try to promote more favourable social conditions for participation in arts and culture.

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